

Maternal Labour Market Participation and Mothers' Marital Transitions

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Abstract:

Over the last 30 years rates of marital breakdown and divorce have dramatically increased. In the same period levels of participation in the workforce by Australian women has doubled. Are these social phenomena associated, and if so, are those mothers categorised by Hakim (2000) as 'work-centred' more likely to separate and divorce than 'home-centred women? This paper uses NLC data to make a preliminary exploration of this question. The patterns of maternal labour market participation of those mothers who changed marital status between Wave 1 and Wave 2 of the NLC survey are compared with those whose marital status remained the same. Results suggest little, if any, relationship between a mother's level of maternal work activity and the likelihood of marital separation.

Introduction

During the past 30 years, Australian family formation patterns have been transformed. Continuing reductions in the rates of marriage and rising rates of divorce and relationship breakdown since the 1970s indicate a radical change in the structure of Australian family life. On current indications, around 40 per cent of Australian registered marriages (ABS 2002), and even higher rates of de facto relationships (McDonald 1995) will ultimately break down. Within these figures it is the 54 per cent of divorces that involve dependent children that causes the greatest level of social concern. Sole parent families now make up 22 percent of all families with dependent children and around two thirds of these sole parent families are formed as the result of marital dissolution (ABS 2002).

Marital breakdown and divorce, while experienced at the micro level of the individual and the family, are social phenomena. Multiple risk factors have been identified as associated with divorce and marital breakdown. Factors frequently cited as increasing the risk of marital breakdown include: marrying at a young age, parental divorce; previous marriage, cohabitation and pregnancy prior to marriage, and differing ethnic/cultural backgrounds of marital partners (Jones 1994; Saranatakos 1994; Wolcott & Hughes 1999). Low education and income levels are also implicated, with research suggesting that the main increase in divorce/separation has occurred amongst Australians from the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum (Birrell 2000).

On the broader social level, expanded life choices, especially for women, are often cited as a foundational influence in both lower marriage rates and rising divorce rates. In Australia, and other western developed nations, the breaking down of traditional gender roles and women's increasing independence, as indicated by greater participation in the public sphere and higher levels of female educational and labour market participation and the general availability of contraception, are viewed as providing women with options other than marrying or remaining in an unsatisfactory relationship (Gilding 1997; Wolcott & Hughes 1999; Parker 2002). Workforce activity, in particular, can provide women with financial and social independence. This independence can be both from the institution of marriage at a societal level or, at the individual level, from a specific marital relationship.

Large-scale Australian maternal workforce participation is a relatively new phenomenon with Australian women's labour market participation rates increasing by over 50 per cent in the last three decades. The majority of this increase has come from partnered women with dependent children and by 2001, 57 per cent of couple families with dependent children parents has both parents in employment (ABS 2003). Australian mothers are also returning to work at earlier stages in their child's life. In 2002, over 49 per cent of women with children aged less than five years of age were participating in the workforce (ABS 2003).

These data illustrate a substantial transformation in Australian mothers' level of labour market activity. Moreover, the rising participation in paid work of women with dependent children has occurred in tandem with rising rates of divorce and marital breakdown. This parallel raises the question of whether these two social phenomena are related. The Australian literature on this topic, as outlined earlier, generally places the impact on divorce rates of women's increased labour market participation as part of a group of wider social changes, rather than as a separate risk factor. One exception is Bracher et al. (1993) who, using 1986 National Survey of the Australian Family Project data, find a strong positive effect of wives' employment on the risk of separation. This effect however weakens over time, suggesting that changing the impact of a wife's employment reduced, as married women's labour market participation became more the norm than the exception. Overseas, the influence of women's economic independence on marital stability has been the subject of wider investigation, with mixed results (See South 2001; Sayer & Bianchi 2000). The relevance of these, mostly US based, studies to the Australian context is also limited by significance differences in Australian rates of divorce and patterns and levels of mothers' labour market participation. Given the symmetrical rise in divorce and married women's labour market participation rates, the question of whether a woman's level of labour market activity is a specific correlate for marital breakdown, therefore, remains a valid one. Are those partnered mothers who actively participate in the labour market more likely to have their marriages end than those who adopt a primarily home-based mothering role? This paper seeks to provide a preliminary exploration of this question through a comparative examination of the labour market participation patterns of a group of Australian mothers who have recently undergone a transition in their marital status.

Mothers' Labour Force Participation

Mothers' employment decisions are not made purely on practical or financial grounds. Integral to such decisions are the contemporary norms and values around the appropriateness and rightness of mixing paid work and mothering responsibilities. Australian social attitudes towards mothers' employment tend to be conservative, with public approval for mothers' employment rising in line with their child's age. Evans (2000), reports that only 4 per cent of Australians surveyed in the 1994/1995 International Social Survey Program, favoured full-time work for mothers of children under school age, rising to 16 per cent of full-time work for mothers of school age children. Part-time work had significantly higher approval rating, with one-third approving part-time work for mothers of pre-school age children and nearly three-quarters in favour of part-time work for those with school age children.

Mothers' own attitudes also indicate the primacy of motherhood in their labour market decisions. Up to half of Australian women believe that a pre-school child will suffer if his or her mother works, and mothers' decisions to withdraw from, or to delay re-entering, the labour market centre around perceptions of their children's needs (Vandenhoeval 1991: Wilson, Pech et al. 1999). Current maternal employment patterns reflect these concerns, with the bulk of the employment increase among Australian mothers being in part-time employment. Among partnered mothers with dependent children 22 per cent are employed full-time, 38 per cent are employed part-time, 3 per cent are unemployed and another 37 per cent are not in the labour force. For sole mothers, 17 per cent are in full-time work, 27 per cent in part-time work, nine per cent unemployed and 47 per cent not in the labour market (ABS 2003a). A majority of mothers in part-time work also express satisfaction with their working hours. Part-time employment is viewed positively as allowing labour market participation to be combined with family and, more particularly, mothering obligations (Glezer & Wolcott 1997).

Yet, while motherhood is a dominant factor, mothers' perceptions about the compatibility of paid labour and mothering work are not homogenous. For some mothers there is a basic ideological conflict between motherhood and the economic behaviour of the paid worker. Others see paid work an option, but only if that participation will not compromise their primary caring role. Still others consider full-time work as providing the best financial and social environment for themselves and

their family. These variations in mothers' understandings and practice of their mother/worker roles have been variously theoretically categorised into ideal types, with the work British sociologist Catherine Hakim the most influential in Australia.

Under Preference Theory, Hakim asserts that the vast majority of women in modern countries now have real choices 'between a life centred on private, family work and a life centred on market work or other activities in the public sphere' (2000:2). The results of such choice, argues Hakim, is that married women now mostly exercise their preference by taking a less demanding job than their partners so that they might concentrate on child rearing. As such, women's labour market choices should be seen as related to social agency, reflecting their actual preference on the appropriate mix of motherhood and labour market activity. Using preference theory as her base, Hakim categorises women into three main types: work centred women who have no children or want to return to work quickly; home centred women who regard child rearing as their most important job; and the majority of women, categorised as adaptive women, who try to balance the two roles by dipping in and out of the workforce. This study uses Hakim's concept of the three ideal types of women as its frame to explore whether a mother's level of workforce involvement, as a mother, might be associated with the likelihood of marital relationship breakdown.

The Study

This study uses data from Waves 1 (1996/97) and Wave 2 (2000) of the Negotiating the Life Course Study. The NLC is an indefinite life panel survey of Australian family members aged 18 – 54 years and is broadly representative of the Australian population. The NLC examines the ways Australians negotiate the pathways through work and family. The first round of phone interviews was conducted in 1996/1997, with 2231 persons selected from the electronic white pages (McDonald et al. 2000). The second wave (2000) of the study conducted telephone interviews with 1768 respondents who had previously been surveyed in Wave 1. The sample for this study is drawn from women who were mothers of resident children aged less than 18 years in 1996/97 (Wave 1) and who were either living in a de jure marriage with the father of (all) their children, or were a sole mother and not residing with a partner. Mothers in de facto relationships were not included to keep the categorisation of a mother as either 'married' or 'sole', unambiguous. In 1996/97 this criteria yielded a sample of 581 cases. Matching of this sample with the respondents from Wave 2 in 2000

reduced the number of active cases to 484. Those respondents whose legal marital status was widowed in Wave 2 (n=12) were excluded, leaving a sample of 472 cases¹.

Results

Categorised by their comparative marital statuses in Wave 1 and Wave 2, the mothers are divided into four distinct groups. These are: ‘now separated’ mothers who were in a de jure marriage in Wave 1, but whose current marital status is separated/divorced (n=25); ‘now married’ mothers who were unpartnered (single) in Wave 1, but are in a de jure marriage in Wave 2, (n=12) and those mothers who did not change their parenting partnered status between Wave 1 and Wave 2 (‘still sole’ mother, n = 94, and ‘still married’ mother, n=341)².

The characteristics of the four groups are compared, in Table 1, across a range of socio-demographic variables associated with labour market activity. While the small numbers of ‘now separated’ and ‘now married’ mothers need to be borne in mind, the results display some diversity between the groups of mothers³. The ‘now separated’ mothers appear slightly younger, with a greater proportion of their children aged less than 11 years, but are similar to the ‘still married’ mothers in the size of their families.

Table 1: Comparison of Mother Groups

Variable	Now Separated (n=25) %	Still Married (n=341) %	Still Sole Parent (n=94) %	Now Married (n=12) %
<i>Age Group 2000</i>				
18-24 years	0	0	0	8
25-34 years	32	18	17	8
35-44 years	52	54	49	67
45-54 years	16	26	30	17
55+ years	0	2	4	0
<i>Age of Youngest Child 2000</i>				
0-4 years	28	26	9	33
5-11 years	48	36	37	33
12-17 years	16	26	40	8
18 or older	8	12	14	25

¹ The low number of cases in the ‘now separated’ and the ‘now married’ groups makes these results exploratory only.

² Three ‘now separated’ respondents and 17 ‘still sole’ mother respondents reported that they had entered a de-facto relationship since 1997. For the purposes of this analysis, these cases are maintained in their ‘now separated’ and ‘still sole’ mother categories.

³ Tests of significance for the cross-tabulations are not reported due to the small sample of ‘now separated’ and ‘now married’ mothers.

<i>Number of Children 1996/97</i>				
One Child	20	21	44	50
Two Children	32	49	34	42
Three Children	32	21	18	8
Four or more children	16	9	4	0
<i>Employment</i>				
Employed Last Week 1996/97	56	65	67	42
Employed Last Week 2000	48	71	73	83
<i>Receive Income Support*</i>				
Yes 1996/97	28	20	60	67
Yes 2000	60	17	40	17

* 'Receives Income Support' is an imputed variable constructed by amalgamating responses to questions relating to receipt of the individual income support payments.

Source: NLC 1996/7:2000

The comparative employment and income support receipt data also indicate differences between the groups of mothers. The 'now married' group are the group least likely to be employed at the time of the survey in 1996/97, but the most likely to be employed in 2000. The lower employment rates in 1996/97 might be explained by the generally younger age of this group's children to those of the 'still sole' mothers. As for the now very high rates of workforce activity, perhaps having a resident partner increases the opportunities for this group to participate in the labour market. The 'still sole' mothers are equally likely to be employed as the 'still married' group in 1996/97 and in 2000⁴.

The 'now separated' mothers, however, are less likely in 1996/97 and much more likely in 2000, not to be in current employment than the married mothers. More than half were not in paid work in the week of the survey in 2000. This result might be seen as indicating that those mothers who are not in the labour force might be more likely to separate. However, this picture of the mothers' employment status varies somewhat from this group's labour market status in the year of their marital separation. An analysis of these data (not shown here), indicate that 76 per cent of the 'now separated' mothers reported that they were employed at least for some period during the year of their marital separation, a level very similar to that of the 'still married' mothers.

⁴ This data differs from the Wave 1 sample of 585 cases where the sole mothers are significantly less likely to be employed than the married mothers (see Walter 2002a). This suggests that sole mothers not in the labour force were more likely to be lost from the survey between Wave 1 and Wave 2.

More dramatic has been the change in the reliance on income support payment among the groups of mothers. The level of receipt of income support for the 'now separated' mothers has climbed from 28 per cent before their marriages ended in 1996/97 to 60 per cent in 2000. For the 'now married' mothers, the trend is completely opposite with their rate of receipt dropping from a high of 67 per cent to a low of only 17 per cent. The rate of receipt has stayed around the same for the 'still married' mothers and dropped in line with increased employment levels among the 'still sole' mothers.

Mothers' Levels of Labour Market Activity

While the mothers' labour market status at the time of the two waves of the NLC survey provide a measure of comparison, they do not provide an indication of the overall levels of maternal labour market participation. To provide a more comprehensive measure, historic labour market data is used to operationalise maternal work activity levels using Hakim's ideal types of work centred, home centred or adaptive women as a guide for this process. Matching ideal types, however, with the way Australian mothers actually negotiate their lifecourse labour market and family roles is fraught with difficulty. Not only do mothers tend to vary their level of labour market activity according to the number and ages of their children, but the rapidly changing nature of Australian mothers' relationship with the labour market during the 1980s and 1990s makes it difficult to disentangle the effects of changing social mores and practices around maternal work behaviours from preference effects. Nonetheless, using the NLC's historical employment data provide a way of estimating a mothers' overall level of maternal labour market activity.

Two maternal employment variables are constructed. The first, 'Full-time Work Proportion' uses data from Q14a 55 –Q14a96 from Wave 1 to calculate the proportion of years that a mother had worked full time since, and including, the year of the birth of her eldest child to, and including, 1996. The second 'Part-time Work Proportion' uses data from the same questions to calculate the proportion of years that a mother had worked part-time since, and including, the year of birth of her eldest child to, and including, 1996⁵. 1996 was selected as the cut-off year to negate the effect of an expected reduction in the 'now separated' mothers' level of workforce participation in the first few years after the marital separation (see Walter 2002b).

⁵ In the three cases where the year of birth of the eldest child was 1997, the mother's nominated work status in 1997 was the value included in the constructed variables.

Comparison of the constructed variables ‘Full-time Work Proportion’ and ‘Part-time Work Proportion’ found no significant differences between the mothers who are still married in 2000 and those mothers who had separated between 1996/97 and 2000.

The mean proportional score for ‘still married’ mothers (n=341) on ‘Full-time Work Proportion’ was .23 compared with .28 for those mothers who are ‘now separated’ ($t = .862, df = 364, p = .389$). For ‘Part-time Work Proportion’, the mean proportional score for the ‘still married’ mothers was .33 compared with .30 for the now separated mothers ($t = -.345, df 361, p = .730$).

Dividing the maternal employment scores for both ‘Full-time Work Proportion’ and ‘Part-time Work Proportion’ into quartiles displays the distribution of the scores. As shown in Tables 2 and 3 below, the proportional scores are very evenly spread among the different groups of mothers. Around two thirds of all four mother groups had worked full-time for 25 per cent or less of the years since the birth of their eldest child and only around 10 per cent of each group had worked full-time for more than 75 per cent of this time.

Table 2 ‘Full-Time Work Proportion’ by Partnered Status 2000

Proportion of time in full-time work	Now Separated (n=25) %	Still Married (n=335) %	Still Sole Parent (n=92) %	Now Married (n=12) %
0% - 25%	64	70	63	67
26%-50%	20	13	16	17
51% -75%	4	7	10	8
76%-100%	12	10	11	8

Source: NLC 1996/7:2000

For part-time work the scores are not quite as evenly spread, but demonstrate a similar pattern. A majority of the mothers were engaged in part-time work for less than half of the years since the birth of their eldest child.

Table 3: ‘Part-Time Work Proportion’ by Partnered Status 2000

Proportion of time in part-time work	Now Separated (n=25) %	Still Married (n=338) %	Still Sole Parent (n=93) %	Now Married (n=12) %
0% - 25%	60	51	43	50
26%-50%	8	19	27	8
51% -75%	12	16	14	17
76%-100%	20	14	16	25

Source: NLC 1996/7:2000

The data from these two constructed variables, 'Full-Time Work Proportion' and 'Part-Time Work Proportion' is then used to create a single maternal work history variable. This calculation counts full-time work years at twice the value of part-time years and provides a single comparable integer to signify mothers' overall level of maternal labour market participation. The following formula is applied:

$$\text{'Mother/Worker' variable} = \frac{[(\text{Full-time Work Proportion} * 2) + \text{Part-Time Work Proportion}]}{2}$$

This 'mother/worker' variable also allows the respondents to be categorised into Hakim's three ideal types: home-centred, adaptive and work centred women. If the 'mother/worker' maternal employment scores are divided into quartiles to display the distribution of the scores then: those mothers with scores of 0 to .25 can be regarded as home-centred types, who regard child rearing as their most important job; those with scores from .26 to .75 can be categorised as adaptive women who try to balance the two roles and maintain some contact with the workforce; and those with scores of .76 and above can be seen as work-centred women who return to full-time work quickly after having their children.

As Table 4 shows, the mothers do vary in their level of maternal labour market activity in patterns analogous to Hakim's three ideal types. Based on their overall level of labour force activity since their eldest child was born, roughly a third of the mothers are 'home-centred', concentrating mostly on family and mothering obligations to the exclusion of most labour market activity. Around half are in the 'adaptive' category, participating in the paid work, probably mostly part-time, as their family obligations permit, and around 15 per cent of the mothers are work-centred, spending most of their post-motherhood years actively engaged in the workforce. The patterns are also similar to the previously outlined ABS estimates of Australian mothers' current levels of participation in the labour market.

Table 4: 'Mother/Worker' Workforce Time by Partnered Status 1996 - 2000

'Mother/Worker' maternal work history score	Now Separated (n=25) %	Still Married (n=338) %	Still Sole Parent (n=93) %	Now Married (n=12) %
0.0 - .25	32	36	31	25
.26 - .50	28	36	28	42
.51 - .75	24	15	26	25
.76 - 1.0	16	13	15	8

Source: NLC 1996/7:2000

However, while overall patterns in level of participation are clear, there are no obvious, discernible differences between the patterns of maternal labour market activity for the 'still married' mothers and those who are 'now separated'. The 'now separated' mothers are no more likely to be work-centred mothers, or no less likely to be home-centred mothers than the 'still married' mothers. The pattern among the mothers categorised as 'adaptive' varies slightly with 'still married' mothers having higher proportions with scores under .50, but the dispersal evens out when those scoring .51 - .75 are added. This similarity of score dispersal between the 'now separated' and 'still married' mother groups is confirmed by a t test which finds no statistical difference between the mean 'Mother/Worker' scores for each group, $t = .711$, $df = 361$, $p = .478$.

Based on the employment and income receipt status differentials observed in the bi-variate analysis between the 'now separated' and 'still married' mothers, these variables are assessed against the mothers' overall levels of maternal workforce activity. A t test of the two groups' mean 'mother/worker' scores and their current employment status found no significant association between the two variables, $t = 1.702$, $df = 23$, $p = .106$. That is, 'now separated' mothers' current level of labour market activity is not associated with their level of maternal workforce participation while in the marital relationship. However, maternal workforce participation history, while married, is associated with the likelihood of being welfare dependent if the marriage ends. A t test finds a relationship between 'mother/worker' scores and whether a 'now separated' mother was currently in receipt of an income support payment, $t = -3.846$, $df = 23$, $p = .001$. This result indicates, first, that 'now separated' mothers currently receiving income support have significantly lower levels of overall maternal workforce participation than those not currently in receipt of an income support payment. Second, the finding suggests that those 'now separated' mothers with higher mother/worker scores, while no more likely to be currently in the labour market, if working, are likely employed in positions that are remunerated to a level that precludes income support entitlements.

Discussion

These results, although limited by the small numbers, suggest two main points about the nature of the maternal employment of Australian mothers. The first is that Australian mothers do vary their level of maternal labour force participation along

lines compatible with Hakim's (2000) Preference Theory's three ideal mother/worker types of home-centred, adaptive and work-centred. While, motherhood is obviously an important component in the labour market decisions of all Australian mothers, the level of mothers' participation in the labour market, as mothers, varies significantly among mothers.

The second point is that these patterns of maternal workforce participation history do not appear to be associated with the likelihood of marital breakdown. Mothers who are married in 1996/97, but separated/divorced by 2000, are no more likely to be work-centred in their approach to the labour market than those mothers who remained married during this period. Indeed, the evenness of the pattern of maternal employment amongst this study's four groups of mothers suggests that the degree of a mothers' work or home-centeredness is almost totally unrelated to the mother's current marital status. Thus, while the unprecedented level of workforce activity by Australian mothers may indeed operate to provide women with options other than staying in an unsatisfactory marital relationship, it seems that it is the presence of these options and not necessarily the mother's active participation in the labour market that supports the marital dissolution decision. While labour market activity does likely provide women with greater financial independence, the level of financial independence as defined in this study by level of labour market participation, is not a risk factor, in itself, for marital dissolution.

Additionally, although the current employment of 'still married' mothers and the 'now separated' mothers was markedly different, these differences appear to be the result of the marital separation itself, rather than a reflection of inherent differences between the groups of mothers. That the 'now separated' mothers' current labour market status was not statistically related to the overall previous level of maternal employment of this group suggests that factors other than preference are at play here in determining mothers' post separation labour market decisions. As suggested elsewhere, (see Walter 2002b), these other facts appear linked to the soleness of sole mothering, especially in the first few years post marital separation. A mothers' level of maternal labour market participation within the marriage was, however, a risk factor for whether the mother will be welfare dependent after the transition from married to sole mother. These results have implications for social and welfare policy.

Conclusion

Rising divorce rates among Australian families and rising levels of maternal labour market participation have occurred concurrently throughout the last three decades. While this study can be regarded as a preliminary investigation only, the results suggest that these social phenomena are not specifically correlated. Rather, both are likely linked into wider social structural changes that have occurred in the later part of the 20th century.

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